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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 001622

SIPDIS

DEPT. FOR WHA, WHA/CEN, INL/LP, AND CA

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SUBJECT: ANOTHER HONDURAN CONGRESSMAN BUSTED ON DRUG CHARGES

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 1497

Classified By: Political Chief Francisco L. Palmieri;
Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Yet another Honduran political figure was implicated in drug trafficking when he was arrested on July 6 fleeing the scene of an airplane crash in the eastern department of Olancho. National Party Deputy, Armando Avila Panchame, was arrested by the police for drug trafficking and attempted murder (for running his car through two police roadblocks.) President Ricardo Maduro, President of the National Congress Pepe Lobo, and Attorney General Roy Medina -- all indicated congressional immunity would be lifted to pursue the prosecution of this deputy. This arrest could prove to be a key test of the political and judicial systems, ability to attack the growing narcocorruption problem in Honduras. END SUMMARY

2. (U) On Saturday, July 5, Honduran police authorities, responding to intelligence information, mounted an operation against a suspected drug trafficking airplane that crashed in the eastern Honduran department of Olancho. The operation resulted in the arrest of nine individuals, including a member of the Honduran National Congress, Armando Avila Panchame, a Colombian, and a Venezuelan. Unfortunately, there were no drugs seized or found; however police are still conducting a series of searches of the surrounding areas. Canine units, funded by a State International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) program, did alert to the presence of drugs in the aircraft and vehicles. The bold narco aircraft landing took place on a secondary paved roadway that was blocked by drug traffickers, vehicles, which had been modified to illuminate the makeshift runway with floodlights. Trees along the roadway had also been removed with chainsaws. Police recovered automatic AK-47 and M-16 rifles, 200 rounds of ammunition, satellite phones, radio equipment, and night reflector vests at the location. It appears that the aircraft successfully unloaded its cargo, but in its haste to depart as police descended on the scene it struck one of the vehicles that had secured one end of the improvised runway.

3. (SBU) There is some media speculation, based on public statements made by the son of the notorious (and currently incarcerated in the U.S.) drug trafficker Ramon Matta, that there was a confrontation between rival drug cartels. The location of the drug delivery abutted a ranch owned by the Matta family. Matta is claiming to have aided police by informing them of the landing of the suspect aircraft and then shooting at it as it tried to depart. He also said he permitted searches of his property for the missing drugs. (Comment: Police report no such cooperation and have said that the shots fired from the Matta group were a signal to the aircraft's pilot that police were approaching. There were bullet holes observed in the aircraft. End Comment.)

4. (C) While no drugs were seized, Honduran Deputy Avila Panchame is charged with attempted murder for having run his vehicle through two police roadblocks. The statements of two police officers at those roadblocks accuse Avila Panchame of refusing to stop and charging through the roadblocks. He is also being charged with drug trafficking. The arrest of a member of Congress is keeping the spotlight on the extent to which narcocorruption is permeating Honduran institutions. President Maduro, President of the National Congress Pepe Lobo, and the Attorney General have all indicated congressional immunity will be waived in this case to pursue the prosecution of this deputy on the drug charges. Under the Honduran Constitution, immunity for attempted murder or murder are exempt from any congressional immunity claim (Comment: This incident is not the first time that Avila Panchame has come to the Embassy's attention for possible involvement in drug trafficking. Earlier in April of this year, the same vehicle in which he was traveling during this incident was observed by witnesses at the scene of an earlier suspected crashed aircraft. In that incident police seized 397 kilos of cocaine, but no arrests were ever made. End Comment.)

5. (C) COMMENT: This arrest could prove to be a key test of the political and judicial systems, ability to attack the growing narco-corruption problem in Honduras. Avila Panchame is now the third Honduran political figure to be arrested on

drug trafficking charges in the last year. Coming on the heels of the June 20 arrest of Liberal Party Central American Parliament member Cesar Diaz in Nicaragua (reftel) and last summer,s arrest of a former deputy in Panama (both of whom were arrested in possession of heroin) the media is highlighting the mounting connections between international drug traffickers and Honduran political elites. As reported septel, the Ambassador recently placed the Attorney General on notice that his office must produce some high-profile drug-trafficking and corruption prosecutions immediately or risk losing further U.S. support. We will be monitoring developments in this case closely. END COMMENT.
Palmer